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ABSTRACT

Research in the area of person perception has been dominated by the assumption that people seek stable trait information and view others as highly consistent. To examine whether perceivers would have difficulty in thinking of ways that people have changed, and in reporting instances of such change, 120 college students were asked to complete short essays in which they reported areas of constancy and of change in their best friends and in themselves. Results showed change judgments were equally as frequent as judgments of sameness, and this was true in judging others as well as self. Overall, the most frequent reference was to trait attributes, which accounted for 40 percent of all judgments. Such judgments were significantly more likely when describing areas of constancy rather than change, and when describing a friend rather than self. Subjects were more likely to refer to constancy in interests, and more likely to refer to changes in goals and maturation than to constancy in this area. The results provide clear evidence of the richness and diversity of intuitive judgments of change in persons. (JAC)

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Perceptions of Stability and Change in Others and Self

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Abstract

Research in the area of person perception has been dominated by the assumption that people seek stable trait information and view others as highly consistent. This assumption implies that perceivers will have difficulty in thinking of ways that persons have changed and in reporting instances of such change. However, the results of the present study, in which people were asked to report areas of constancy and of change in themselves and others, cast doubt on this assumption. Intuitive judgments of change in self and others were found to readily occur; however, aspects of personality described as changing differed somewhat from those aspects described as stable.

In the area of person perception a primary focus has been the phenomenon of stability in person judgments. It has been widely assumed within the field that perceivers generally form highly stable judgments (Asch, 1952; Heider, 1958; Mischel, 1973), and that perceivers attend most closely to those aspects of person information that are of value in terms of assessing stable, underlying characteristics (Heider, 1958; Jones & Davis, 1965; Jones & Nisbett, 1971). Impressions are believed to be readily formed, often on the basis of little information, and yet once formed are believed to be tenaciously held and highly resistant to change (Cantor & Mischel, 1979; Jones & Goethals, 1971; Nisbett & Ross, 1980; Ross, 1977). Because of the perceived centrality of these stable, traitlike judgments, much of the recent work has been directed toward examining those cognitive processes which presumably maintain and support the perception of others as stable entities (cf. Hastie, Ostrom, Ebbesen, Wyer, Hamilton, & Carlston, 1980; Higgins, Herman, & Zanna, 1981).

Yet while the perception of persons has been construed largely as a search for stable, traitlike information, outside the person perception area emphasis has been placed on person change. Outside person perception there is evident concern with how and how much people change. Although interest in person change is evident across a variety of areas in psychology, it is perhaps most salient in clinical and developmental psychology. Those in clinical psychology have become increasingly concerned with issues of how and when change occurs as a result of therapeutic intervention. Widespread

professional disagreement, coupled with empirical work which has failed to support professional perceptions of therapeutic effectiveness, has led to the reconsideration of basic issues of therapeutic change (Ervin, 1980; Garfield, 1981; Goldfried, 1980; Smith & Glass, 1977; Wachtel, 1977; Wolpe, 1981). While within the clinical field, interest in person change is generally related to interest in the consequences of an intervention, in developmental psychology interest is often expressed in more gradual change. Students of developmental change address issues of progression that reflect the gradual accumulation of change due to added years of living and experience. How is a ten year old different from a five year old? In what ways is someone at midlife different from what he or she was like in early adulthood? What changes does later life bring? And, as in clinical psychology, a number of interesting conflicts have developed surrounding issues of stability versus change (cf. Block, 1981; Brim & Kagan, 1980; Costa & McCrae, 1980). These ongoing controversies clearly reflect the centrality of issues of person change.

In sharp contrast to developments in other areas, research in person perception has not considered judgments of change; in fact, perhaps just the opposite has occurred in the area. Instead of a concern with intuitive judgments of change, it has been argued that people essentially see each other as unchangeable--that at base intuitive perceivers are thorough-going trait theorists (Cantor & Mischel, 1979; Ebbesen, 1981; Mischel, 1968). At times it has been asserted that this is due to motivational causes (Pervin, 1978) and sometimes as a result

of specific cognitive mechanisms (Nisbett & Ross, 1980; Ross, 1977; Taylor & Crocker, 1981), but in either case people are believed to be relatively insensitive to new information and relatively unlikely to alter their theories. The acceptance of this conception of person perception as a "conservative", trait-dominated approach has been widespread.

When this assumption of constancy is juxtaposed against the great interest in person change in other areas, the question is raised of whether intuitive perceivers show an absence of interest in and judgments of person change. It might be expected that perceivers are concerned with change, perhaps in much the same way as are psychologists. It is quite possible that intuitive judgments of person change are common and are of central importance whenever more than brief relationships and interactions are considered. Yet these judgments have remained unnoticed by the person perception community.

In the present study we turn to the basic question of whether perceivers make intuitive judgments of person change, clearly a fundamental issue arising from recent theorizing about the predominance of consistency judgments in person perception. This is one in a series of studies investigating intuitive judgments of change. In other work (Silka, Note 1) we have began a re-examination of the research that may have contributed to the widespread belief that people largely seek out and perceive consistency. We have also begun to look at various processes that may influence intuitive judgments of change (Silka, 1981).

The present study begins with the simple premise that if people focus on traits, view others as highly consistent, and form stable impressions, they will have great difficulty in thinking of ways that other people have changed. This will become apparent, for when asked to describe changes they will list fewer items than when asked to describe areas of sameness. To test for this possibility in the current study open-ended essays written on issues of constancy and issues of change were analyzed for relative frequencies of references to change and references to constancy. Consideration was given not only to the relative frequency of such judgments but also to possible area differences in person characteristics intuitively described as having changed or remained the same. In addition to investigating judgments of person change, the present study also investigated judgments of self change. Perceptions of self change were included because of their importance in many areas. In both developmental and clinical psychology there has been considerable interest in the consequences for the self of change (cf. Brim & Kagan, 1980). There also has been considerable controversy about when assessment of self change occurs (cf. Garfield, 1981). It is not clear how perceptions of self change might differ from perceptions of change in others. Early person perception work, particularly in the attribution area, suggested that the process of making self attributions is quite different than making attributions for others (Jones & Nisbett, 1971; Nisbett & Valins, 1971). However, recent social cognition work has focused

on certain similarities between the processes underlying judgments of others and judgments of self (Kuiper & Derry, 1981; Markus, 1977; Rogers, 1981). Thus, judgments of change in self may be quite similar to or quite different from intuitive judgments of change in others.

Method

Subjects. One hundred and twenty general psychology students participated in partial fulfilllment of course requirements. Participants were randomly assigned to one of four orders of essay-writing conditions.

Procedure. Participants were informed that the purpose of the study was to investigate various aspects of person perception. They were told that they would be asked to write four short essays on this general topic. Each subject wrote two essays about his/her best friend, one describing the ways the best friend had changed in the last few years and one describing the ways in which his/her best friend was "still pretty much the same" as he/she was a few years ago. Each participant also wrote two essays about him/herself, one describing changes and one outlining points of constancy. The essay order was randomly varied such that one-quarter of the subjects wrote one of these four essays first. Subjects were not informed of the specific nature of the subsequent essay topics until completing the initial essay. For the purposes of the present study, only the first essay written by each participant was included in the final analysis. These essays were subjected to a content analysis. Based on pretests with an earlier sample, pretested categories of response items were employed to analyze essays.

Results

An analysis of number of judgments in each area was first completed. As Table 1 shows, change judgments were equally as frequent as judgments of sameness, and this was true in judging others and in judging self. A test for significance showed no significant difference as a function of essay type. Participants were equally adept at pointing to areas of change as describing areas of constancy. On the average 4.11 judgments were made. The number of judgments made ranged from one to eleven. In all, 493 judgments were made, 238 describing areas of change and 255 detailing areas of constancy. Because the overall number of items was comparable in the various conditions, it was possible to directly compare judgments in terms of area of person characteristics described. As is evident in Table 2, several different categories of judgments were compared. These categories summarized the major kinds of items described, and all but 29 judgments could be placed in one of the pretested categories. Overall, the most frequent reference was to trait attributes. Comments in this area accounted for 40% of all judgments. Such judgments were significantly more likely, however, when describing areas of constancy than when describing areas of change ($\chi = 4.3$, $p < .05$) and when describing the another rather than the self ($\chi = 3.8$, $p < .05$). Judgments of constancy also departed from judgments of change with regard to which of the various categories was next most common. Whether referring to self or other, in describing areas of constancy, subjects were more likely to refer to constancy in interests than

to changes in interests (χ with Yate's correction = 20.89, $p<.05$). When referring to changes subjects (both in describing selves and others) were more likely to refer to changes in goals and maturation than to constancy in this area ($\chi = 22.0$, $p<.05$). Comments about constancy and change also occurred in several other areas, as can be seen in Table 2, but in these categories such judgments were equally common across all essay conditions.

Discussion

The present study provides clear evidence of the richness and diversity of intuitive judgments of change in persons. Participants readily made judgments of change, not only about others, but also about themselves. The judgments ranged from obviously transient characteristics to characteristics that might clearly be considered stable and central. It is true that perception of change occurred in slightly different areas than perceptions of constancy, although again there was substantial overlap. Essays written about change were more likely to describe changes in such person characteristics as goals and maturity, whereas essays written about areas of constancy were more likely to focus on constancy in interests. Yet both groups made the majority of comments about trait attributes.

And although it might have been argued that change judgments would be made only about relatively peripheral aspects of functioning, the present study does not support such an assertion. Both change judgments and judgments of constancy occurred in areas that have traditionally been considered rather central to personality functioning (e.g., attitudes, values, and trait attributes).

Some might argue that the present results which reflect high frequencies of change perceptions are representative only of this particular population. That is, people in their college years may be undergoing rapid change quite at odds with the reduced amount of change people experience at later points in life. According to this view, in other age groups the relative proportion of change to stability judgments would be quite different. Although it is clearly the case that the participants in this study were undergoing significant change, and perhaps more than might occur later, change may be more common across the lifespan than is often supposed. Further research would be needed to investigate the generality of the findings described here. However, it is important to consider the possibility that the perception that intuitive judgments of change are generally limited to a few brief periods may represent simply the same assumption among researchers in the person perception area that stability judgments dominate the person perception process.

Reference Notes

1. Silka, L. Traits vs. the inference of change: A classic study re-examined. Paper to be presented at the Eastern Psychological Association meeting, Philadelphia, April, 1983.

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Table 1

Mean Number of Change and Constancy Judgments

		Type of Judgment	
		Change	Constancy
Person Judged	Other	3.8 (30)	4.5 (30)
	Self	4.1 (30)	4.0 (30)

Table 2

Relative Frequencies of Judgments of Various Categories

Area	Type of Judgment			
	Other-Same	Other-Changed	Self-Same	Self-Changed
Goals and maturity	12	24	10	42
Attitudes and values	7	11	8	5
Intellectual skills and abilities	6	2	10	10
Feelings toward others	8	7	14	13
Physical characteristics	8	9	9	8
Interests	24	6	15	1
Trait attributes	67	44	45	39